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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: CHRISTIAN LEADERS DISCUSS BG HAJJ
ASSASSINATION, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

REF: A. BEIRUT 1950

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1936

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., William K. Grant for reasons 1.
4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) The Charge met separately on December 13 with three Christian leaders, former president and Phalange party leader Amine Gemayel, Minister of Justice Charles Rizk, and head of National Liberal party Dory Chamoun, to discuss Brigadier General Francois al-Hajj's assassination (Ref A) and the status of presidential elections. Regarding the assassination, all three dismissed a direct link to Nahr al-Barid, though they conceded that Fatah al-Islam elements could have participated in the attack. The sophistication of the attack, they argued, points to someone else, presumably Syria.

[1](#)2. (C) On the presidential election, Gemayel and Chamoun said March 14 decided, after a meeting on December 12, to launch an international lobbying campaign to demonstrate its role as the primary representative voice of the Lebanese Christian community, and to weaken the popularity of the opposition Christian leader, Free Patriotic Movement head Michel Aoun. They expressed continued support for Lebanese Armed Forces commander Michel Sleiman to be elected president, but indicated they are considering other options because they feel pressure to elect a president by December 31, the last day of the current legislative session. End summary.

SOPHISTICATION OF ASSASSINATION SUGGESTS "SYRIA OR SOMEONE ELSE"

[1](#)3. (C) On the day after Brigadier General Francois al-Hajj's assassination (Ref A), the Charge, accompanied by PolOff, met separately with three Christian leaders: former president and Phalange party leader Amine Gemayel, Minister of Justice Charles Rizk, and head of the National Liberal party Dory Chamoun. All three, pointing to the sophistication of the attack, concluded that it was not merely the job of Fatah al-Islam (FAI) elements taking revenge after their defeat by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in Nahr al-Barid. This theory has been raised in the press because al-Hajj directed the Nahr al-Barid fight in this role as LAF Operations chief.

[1](#)4. (C) Gemayel said the nature of the December 12

assassination matched the technique employed against assassinated MPs Gebran Tueni in 2005 and Antoine Ghanem in 2007, claiming the same type of bomb and detonator were used. Gemayel said that Fatah al-Islam was not the likely culprit, and cited the less sophisticated Ain Alaq bus bombings in February 2007 as something that was more in line with FAI activity. The al-Hajj attack required extensive surveillance and preparation, beyond the capabilities of FAI, he said. He acknowledged FAI could be a participant in the attack, but probably supported by someone else.

15. (C) Rizk dismissed the idea that the assassination was motivated by competition within the military to replace Lebanese Armed Forces commander Michel Sleiman, should Sleiman become president. Rizk also doubts Georges Khoury, Director of LAF G-2 Intelligence, was behind the attacks. (Note: This related to another theory in the air suggesting that Khoury was behind the attack to eliminate a rival for LAF chief and using the cover of the link to FAI as the culprit. End note.) Rizk speculated that the motive was to paralyze the army, to supplement the current paralysis afflicting the government. Rizk echoed Gemayel's belief that whoever was responsible for the attack was supported by Syria or someone else.

16. (C) Rizk was receptive to the Charge's offer for FBI assistance to investigate the assassination, and promptly contacted one of his advisors, Judge Choukri Sadr, who will initiate the request for assistance to the FBI. (Comment. We'll see. PM Siniora has declined requests for FBI assistance with earlier assassinations. When Charge made same offer to PM's aide Roula Nourredine earlier on December 13, Nourredine said the GOL had requested assistance from the UN commission investigating the Rafiq Hariri killing, hinting that that indicated no need for FBI assistance. End comment)

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17. (C) Chamoun also believes al-Hajj's attack is related to that on Antoine Ghanem, and concluded that Syria is guilty. He said al-Hajj was chosen as the target to distract attention from Syria onto FAI. A resident of Baabda, where al-Hajj was killed, Chamoun said the street where the attack took place is not tightly controlled because it is a high traffic area. Chiming in on the sophisticated nature of the attack, he said he had heard that two security cameras at nearby residences had been smashed. Chamoun pointed to a silver lining in the attack: pro-Aoun Christian officers in the army could blame the political opposition and turn their support to the majority.

MARCH 14 TO GO ON THE OFFENSIVE

18. (C) Gemayel animatedly told us about the historic meeting attended by approximately 50 March 14 Christians the previous night. He said it was the first time in two years that all of the pro-government Christians met together. The two most outspoken critics of a constitutional amendment, Carlos Edde and Boutros Harb, were present, as were Christian representatives from Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist party and Saad Hariri's Future Movement.

19. (C) Gemayel said the participants agreed to form a committee that will reach out to the international community to assert March 14 Christians' role as the primary representative of the Lebanese Christian community and to stress the importance of electing a president immediately. The committee, purposely composed of only Christians to counter Aoun's claim to be sole representative of the Christians, will have the full backing of the March 14 Sunni and Druze communities. Chamoun, also present at the March 14 meeting, was a bit less effusive, labeling the committee's actions as a PR campaign to draw attention to all of the opposition's wrongdoings.

HALF PLUS ONE STILL NEAR THE TABLE

¶10. (C) Gemayel is concerned that the longer a presidential vacuum exists, the level of despair by Christians will increase and therefore the pressure on March 14 to concede also will increase. He believes it is dangerous to discuss filling two vacant Christian cabinet seats at this stage because it would send the message that March 14 is unable to elect a president. (Comment: Some in March 14 are discussing this idea as a means of increasing the Christian character of the cabinet. End comment)

¶11. (C) Gemayel prefers to focus only on the presidency at this time, and believes that while there is a political cease-fire today, this cannot go on beyond a few weeks. He said any controversial measure taken by the government (such as expanding the cabinet, Ref B) could lead to civil war, and the longer there is no president, the greater the possibility more MPs will be assassinated.

¶12. (C) Stressing the need for a president elected with a certain level of legality and legitimacy, an increasingly somber Gemayel was unenthusiastic about any of the options March 14 has considered to date, including electing a president with a half plus one majority. Half plus one remains a possibility, Gemayel acknowledged, but it would need to overcome the Patriarch's resistance -- not an insurmountable feat, he mused, given that the Patriarch used to oppose a constitutional amendment and a military officer as the president and no longer does. Gemayel said he preferred the half plus one option over electing a weak compromise candidate like Michel Edde: "Hizballah will protest but at least we will have our president."

¶13. (C) Chamoun believed March 14 should still try to elect Sleiman. Alternatively, he said that at the last minute, it could pursue a half plus one majority, but he didn't believe enough of March 14's members were amenable to the idea. In this scenario, the candidate would not be Sleiman, who is opposed to election via half plus one.

SYRIA WILL STALL UNTIL MARCH

¶14. (C) Gemayel suspects that Speaker Nabih Berri is being

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given orders to obstruct the election and will block any decision to amend the constitution. He said that if March 14 accepts conditions on the prime minister and other cabinet positions, Berri will respond with more conditions. Gemayel sees a slippery slope that ends with the rejection of previous agreements, including UNSCR 1701 and the Special Tribunal to investigate former PM Rafiq Hariri's assassination. He added that it is impossible to separate Berri from Hizballah because Berri's personal security would be at stake.

¶15. (C) Rizk believes that movement won't occur on the presidential election until the March 2008 Arab League summit in Damascus. He suggested that Syria will "continue to blackmail Lebanon," to secure Saudi Arabian and Egyptian attendance.

¶16. (C) Chamoun echoed Rizk's suspicion that there will not be elections by December 31. He cited Aoun's statement telling people to enjoy the holidays as evidence that Aoun will continue to obstruct the election. He also pointed out something not previously known to us -- according to Chamoun, Berri was the one who suggested to Hariri that March 14 choose Sleiman as its candidate. Chamoun said that Berri made this offer because Syria did not believe March 14 would buy into it, and when March 14 called Syria's bluff by supporting Sleiman, Syria decided against it.

RIZK: SLEIMAN NOT STRONG

¶17. (C) Rizk expressed his support for Sleiman as president, adding, "If he is surrounded by the right people, he will behave favorably." However, if the cabinet is predominately March 8, then Sleiman will steer in that direction. He pinpointed the reason the opposition is lobbying for cabinet positions before agreeing to Sleiman's presidency: whoever surrounds Sleiman, influences Sleiman.

¶18. (C) Chamoun said the same thing about the need to surround Sleiman by the right people in order to influence him, adding that Sleiman owes debts to Syria over his own appointment and over his brother's appointment as governor of Bekaa years ago. He said that the U.S. is well-positioned to influence Sleiman through the provision of military assistance because Sleiman is motivated by having a strong army.

LEBANON NEEDS MORE FROM THE U.S.

¶19. (C) Gemayel turned grave at the end of the meeting, saying that while he is proud of the previous day's March 14 united meeting and simultaneously appreciative of past U.S. support, March 14 requires the full backing of the U.S. In response to the Charge's assurances that the U.S. will support a made-in-Lebanon president elected democratically, Gemayel retorted, "Yes, that is what the government of Fiji says as well," implying that the U.S. needs to do more than make statements. To drive home his point, he said ominously, "Either the U.S. backs us or there will be Syrian and Iranian flags in the Grand Serail." Chamoun also made an appeal for the U.S. to take a stronger position against Syria.
GRANT